

[Keith Whitcomb Jr., Bennington Banner](#)

Congressman Peter Welch visited a number of sites in Bennington County Friday, including the former Green Mountain Race Track, where two developers have their eye on building large power facilities.

Plans are in the works to build a 10-acre, 2.2 megawatt solar field on the southern end of the property, while another company seeks to construct a 29-megawatt biomass and wood pellet production plant on the northern end.

John Guerin, director of energy development for EOS Ventures, the company working on the solar project, guided Welch, members of the Select Board, state Rep. Bill Botzow, D-Pownal/Woodford, a few citizens and members of the press around the area being prepared for the solar arrays.

Guerin told Welch that a potential obstacle facing the project is how much it can receive in Vermont Incentive Tax Credits.

When planning began, there was no limit on the credit that could be received, but it is now becoming apparent that there may be some restrictions. Despite the uncertainty, EOS is still in talks with a company on owning the facility. Some questions remain on the project's cost and how much of the Vermont tax incentives may be needed to cover that cost, Guerin said.

Guerin said many buildings that served at part of the race track facility have been torn down, and work remains on cleaning up debris. Tests are being done on the building material for lead in the paint. If none is found the material will be ground up and used in the project's construction. Because the area is already flat, the construction costs will be lower.

When EOS first proposed the project, the firm said hooking up to the grid would be easy because of existing infrastructure. Guerin said they have since learned the power company

removed some parts to the hookup when the track closed in the early 1990s, so that will need some work.

EOS has been accepted onto a state program that guarantees above-market rates for renewable energy sources such as solar, wind, and hydro. Guerin said a solar facility essentially produces two revenue streams, one from electricity and another from "green" tax credits. By being in the subsidy program, EOS is selling both to the state, which has worked out a contract with utilities.

EOS has filed an application for a certificate of public good with the Vermont Public Service Board under the Act 248 permitting process, and has requested a decision be made by October.

In previous meetings with members of the board, representatives from EOS said they would like to have the solar facility completed by December, as the subsidy program offers rebates for projects completed within three years.

Guerin said the panels themselves have a 25-year warranty to produce 80 percent of the power they're rated for. He said decommissioning of a solar field is simple compared to a wind or nuclear plant, and the price of materials sold for scrap can even cover the cost.

Welch was also informed of Beaver Wood Energy, LLC, a company that had made presentations to the board on its desire for a large biomass and wood pellet manufacturing facility. Representatives from that company have said the project will burn scrap wood not suitable for building material to generate electricity, while slightly higher quality scrap wood will be turned into wood pellets.

The biomass project has drawn concern from residents who say the plant's proposed location off Route 7 in a valley will lead to air pollution in addition to truck traffic and noise.

Rick Morgenthal, a resident of Brookman Road, echoed many of those concerns to Welch and others. Last week, three residents approached the Planning Commission with their concerns,

saying that had read about studies online that claimed the plants are unhealthy.

Select Board Chairman Nelson Brownell told those at the track that it's important to have local control when it comes to such projects.

He said the townspeople and officials all would like more information on the biomass project to they will know what's really being proposed.

He said the company has done some surveying work and studied flood plain maps, and when it does file with the Public Service Board, it will send a copy of the application to the town.

Welch expressed his support for local energy projects, saying more things need to be manufactured in America rather than overseas, energy being one of them.

"Producing local power is a great economic driver, and Pownal could lead the way if they get this solar project under way," Welch said.

He said from what he has heard, the biggest hurdle for the solar project will be tax credits, as the permitting process seems to be going well.